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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 001081

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES PRESSING ASEAN FOR STRONGER BURMA
RESPONSE

REF: MANILA 1065

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) In a frank private discussion May 19 over lunch, Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo expressed his government's disappointment at what he characterized as the "weak" May 18 ASEAN chairman's statement released by ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, calling for the release of imprisoned Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Secretary Romulo criticized the statement's reference to Suu Kyi's weak health as the basis for recommending her release. Referring to ASEAN's longstanding policy toward the Burmese regime, Secretary Romulo opined that, "Engagement is a good thing, but the time comes when one must speak up when another government is doing something wrong."

¶2. (C) Secretary Romulo noted that, immediately following his "cordial" phone conversation with Secretary Clinton the evening of May 16, Manila time, he had spoken with Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and the two had agreed on the need for the strong Philippine response that followed on May 17 (reftel). He said that discussion led to the robust language in the Department of Foreign Affairs' public statement, which called for ASSK's immediate release and condemned the Burmese government's use of "trumped-up charges" to detain the opposition leader.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Secretary Romulo said that the Philippine government would continue to press ASEAN to take a stronger stance on Burma's lack of progress toward democracy, but was not optimistic that a tougher stance was forthcoming anytime soon, given ASEAN's consensus-based decisionmaking approach and traditional noninterference in other states' internal affairs. Secretary Romulo also clearly welcomed the call from Secretary Clinton, which bolstered the Philippine government's natural tendency to support more rapid progress toward democracy and human rights among all its ASEAN partners, a stance which has sometimes led to Manila feeling isolated in the region.

KENNEY